

LOVE THOSE LUSTRONS



by Christy Davis

During their short tenure, they offered the allure of “luster on steel”: small, sturdy, modern homes that answered the American Dream for young families during post-World War II.



They were not much larger than the three-car garages of some new homes today. They were a challenge to decorate. But in the years immediately following World War II, when an increasing number of young families created a high demand for single-family housing, Lustron Homes fulfilled the American Dream of home ownership for several thousand buyers nationwide. Packed with space-saving, low-maintenance features, Lustron Homes have continued to attract buyers—although not the young families to whom they were originally marketed.

The porcelain-enameled, all-metal Lustron house (whose name derived from “luster on steel”) was the brainchild of Carl Strandlund, a Chicago engineer with experience in the manufacture of prefabricated steel buildings for use as White Castle restaurants and Standard Oil gas stations. Could these steel buildings, Strandlund wondered, be designed as houses for the many young couples looking for starter homes in the newly recovering economy? After all, in the years immediately following World War II, housing

Lustron Homes were available in a limited number of colors, including Desert Tan, Surf Blue, and Maize Yellow, as well as Dove Gray, shown in this model at 315 West Fifth, Holton. A former owner of this residence described it as a “showpiece” that attracted wide attention from the community. The Chicago-style picture windows original to this unit have been replaced by modern, double-hung windows.

To a generation accustomed to conserving resources during the Great Depression and World War II, these small homes were for many a dream come true.

was sparse and people were fortunate to have homes of their own. In 1947 some six million families were

sharing homes with friends or relatives. Others lived in huts, basements, or sheds.

Strandlund pitched his idea to the federal Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), which responded positively and agreed to back him financially. So, armed with a government loan and floor plans by architects Morris Beckman and Roy Blass, Strandlund embarked on a quest to resolve the nation's post-war housing shortage. In an airplane factory in Columbus, Ohio, Strandlund's Lustron Corporation turned out twenty-five hundred of these unique homes during its tenure that began in 1947. The Lustron, along with other small mass-produced homes, helped fill the urgent demand in post-war America for inexpensive single-family homes.

Lustrons were designed for assembly-line produc-



(ABOVE) Built-in cabinets and drawers divide the dining area from the kitchen in this two-bedroom home. The Maize Yellow, baked enamel exterior of this Westchester Deluxe model at 2315 C Avenue, Wilson, has successfully withstood the elements since it was constructed in about 1950. (RIGHT) Advertisement for Lustron Homes in the September 25, 1948, *Saturday Evening Post*. Such ads proclaimed, "If you make \$50 to \$60 a week, you can buy a Lustron Home—a better home than you probably ever dreamed you could own."

tion similar to that used in making automobiles and aircraft. In the Columbus plant, steel windows, interior and exterior enameled steel panels, steel trusses, interior steel cabinets, and built-ins were mass-produced and bundled for shipping. Although the average Lustron Home offered only 1,093 to 1,217 square feet—about half the size of today's new homes—it compared favorably in size with conventional new homes of the post-war era. The Lustron Corporation sold its shiny homes in much the same way Chevrolet and Ford sold their cars: through dealerships scattered all over the nation. Also like cars, Lustrons were recognized by model names such as Esquire, Westchester, and Newport, and they came in a limited number of colors: Dove Gray, Desert

Tan, Surf Blue, and Maize Yellow. The steel elements made the homes virtually maintenance free, a benefit the company touted in its marketing literature. Early models offered two bedrooms in the five-room layout, but three-bedroom styles later were added.

THE LUSTRON HOME

Never before in America a house like this



This is your opportunity to enjoy the home of your own you have dreamed about all these years. And you can afford it if you can pay \$50 to \$60 a month.

A home of colorful beauty, spaciousness, lasting permanence. A home so easy to maintain and keep clean. A home you can be proud to own—and a welcome addition to the community.

Size—five spacious rooms, plus large utility room—total of more than 1,000 square feet.

Design—follows growing trend toward contemporary ranch-style architecture. Choice of colors for exterior and interior, all in non-glossy, porcelain enameled steel.

Permanence—fireproof, decay-proof, rustproof, termite-proof, verminproof, ratproof. Sunlight, salt water, or chemical fumes cannot stain or fade finish. It will never fade, crack, or peel.

Maintenance—can be kept clean with damp cloth. Never needs repainting, redecorating, or remodeling.

Heating—most modern type of radiant panel heating from ceiling. Automatic heating unit in utility room. Eliminates air currents that carry dust and dirt through house. Proved in two years of severe Chicago winters. House is fully insulated.

Erection—The Lustron Home will be shipped f.o.b. Columbus to builder-dealer. It can be erected on the site in three to four days, from completion of concrete foundation to putting key in front door.

Somehow, some way, you knew that modern engineering "know-how" would go to work in home construction just as it has in automobiles.

The Lustron Home is the answer—with cost-saving volume-production techniques, unit assembly, and precision engineering applied to home building.

Here is a new standard for living, a home of cheerful convenience with the beauty of porcelain and lifetime strength of steel. Read some of the details about this new contribution to American living—the new Lustron Home described here.

LUSTRON CORPORATION

Box 2023B, Columbus 16, Ohio



The Lustron Home—a new standard for living—features this spacious 14 by 16-foot living room with big picture window and built-in bookshelves.



By 1950 Kansas boasted eight Lustron dealers. Strandlund marketed his homes to young middle-class families who represented the middle third of the housing market.



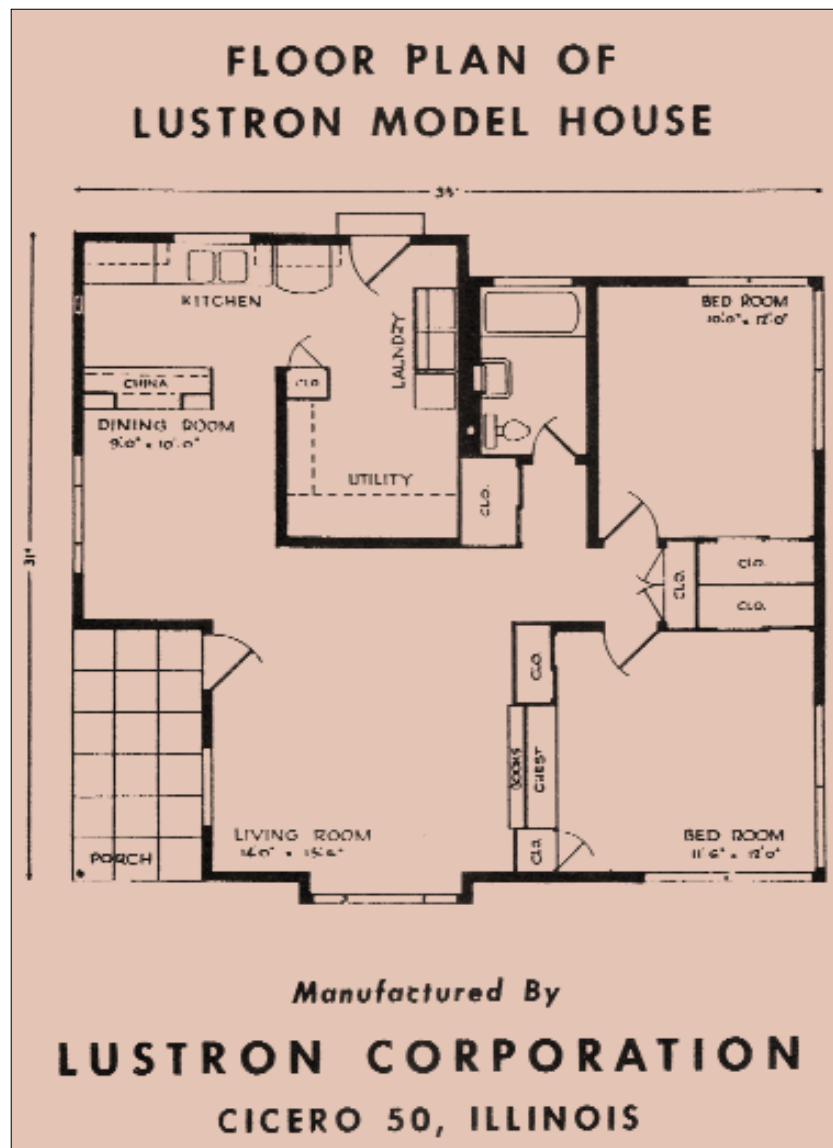
(ABOVE) Lustron owners sometimes attached frame garages to enhance their homes. Although bushes did well along the sides of these homes, such as this one at 214 Park Street, Smith Center, the heat radiating from the metal outer panels sometimes proved fatal to flowers. Desert Tan was the color selected for this Westchester Deluxe model. (BELOW) This longtime Emporia resident, at 617 Lincoln, is one of many Lustrons eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. To date, Kansas has fifteen such homes listed on the National Register.



Early units sold from the factory at between four thousand and seventy-five hundred dollars but often cost several thousand more, depending on how far the homes were shipped.

To a generation accustomed to conserving resources during the Great Depression and World War II, these small homes were for many a dream come true. Each Lustron model came with radiant panel heating in the ceiling that forced heated air downward rather than through air ducts. Also standard in each unit were Lustron-built cabinets, a kitchen sink, basic bathroom appliances, and a water heater. For convenience with household duties some of the more expensive models included a clothes dryer and a sink unit that served as both a dishwasher and a washing machine for clothes. Garbage disposals were optional.

By 1950 Kansas boasted eight Lustron dealers, including Brack Implements in Great Bend, which sold thirty-five homes in a fifteen-month period. An experienced four-man crew could assemble a Lustron Home in a week. The early units sold from the factory at between four thousand and seventy-five hundred dollars but often cost the buyers several thousand more, depending on how far the homes had to be shipped. Too, new owners were responsible for the cost of the property, the cement founda-



This floor plan shows the Esquire model built in Hinsdale, Illinois. The Esquire was one of several styles available for purchase by lucky homeowners in the post-war period.

tion on which the home would be built, construction fees, and basic insulation, wiring, and plumbing. Compared with then-current average new housing costs of between six and seven thousand dollars, Lustrons could be prohibitively expensive in some areas.

Strandlund marketed his homes to young middle-class families who represented the middle third of the housing market. One of these Kansas families was John and Agnes Stradal, who moved to WaKeeney in 1945 to raise their two children and in 1949 constructed a Lustron at 409 North Thirteenth Street. When Smith Center residents James and Grace

Martyn built their Lustron home at 216 Park, they had been married six years and were expecting their second child. Soon after the Martyns built their home, their friends Robert and Frances Grimes built a Lustron next door.

For the most part, the homes lived up to the company's maintenance-free promise. Lustrons had no wood clapboards to paint, no conventional shingles to replace, and no plaster walls to patch. The original roofs proved over time to be, in the words

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of Larned Lustron owner Joanne Reep, "indestructible." Panels were sufficiently thick to avoid denting, even in strong hail, and the metal panels meant no rodents or termites. Periodic maintenance of the exterior steel panels consisted of washing the enameled surfaces and buffing on a protective layer of auto wax. Owners devised creative solutions to repair damage caused by mishaps. When the home of Donald and Joanne Reep was burned in a kitchen fire, they removed the damaged panels and delivered them to an auto body shop for restoration.

Lustrons had another major advantage over most of the small homes constructed in the post-war era: storage space. Built-in bookshelves, cabinets, dressers, and closets helped mitigate the homes' small sizes. In reducing the necessity of moveable furniture, these built-ins also allowed owners to avoid some of the challenges of furnishing their homes tastefully around the sterile architectural fea-



(ABOVE LEFT) The bathroom of the home at 310 East Twentieth Street, Hays, shows the standard fixtures provided with these prefabricated metal homes. (ABOVE RIGHT) Most of the rooms, such as the bedroom in this photo, in the Lustron at 216 Park Street, Smith Center, are Dove Gray, while the kitchen and bathroom are Maize Yellow. (ABOVE) One of seventeen extant Lustrons in Great Bend, this home at 2601 Paseo was built in 1949 in the new Hacienda Addition at the north edge of town.

tures. The built-ins were a selling point for new home buyers George and Patricia Holland, who had little furniture when they purchased a Lustron in Great Bend in the early 1950s.

First-time homeowners like the Hollands found their home's easy upkeep an attractive feature. Margaret Stein, who with her husband, Cletus, reared six children in a Lustron in Ashland, noted that the manufactured home was "a most practical and comfortable home to live in. [The] thick insulation . . . [provided] a shield against cold, heat and outside noise. . . . There was no condensation and the heating was a dream. . . . We all loved and enjoyed living in it."

Although the early homeowners rarely found serious fault with their Lustrons, they shared

the same few criticisms. Among them was that the high-tech Lustrons were difficult to decorate. Many owners felt the soft edges of traditional furnishings

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did not harmonize with the clean lines of the steel panels. Once owners decided on a decorative style, they often found it difficult to achieve. To their chagrin, they found they could not mount pictures larger than those that could be suspended with magnets. Also, a number of owners, including Patricia Holland of Great Bend and the Martyns of Smith Center, found the combination clothes/dishwasher inconvenient. Clothes and dishes could not be washed simultaneously—and the appliance could not be used to store dirty dishes between washes. Grace Martyn resorted to washing dishes by hand until she could purchase a conventional washer and dryer. Some owners also bemoaned that the homes collected dust, possibly due to static electricity or that dust simply was more visible on the homes’ smooth surfaces than on traditional building materials.

Like original Lustron owners, current Newton homeowner Cathy Buss was more attracted to the Lustron home as a novelty than for its efficiency. Still, she misses some of the features found in traditional homes, including woodwork. Buss collects magnets, but she still wishes she could more easily mount decorative pictures. Additionally, she is cautious about what she plants near the house because the heat reflecting off the metal panels dries out her flower beds.



This detail from a Lustron advertisement in the October 23, 1948, *Saturday Evening Post* showcases the luxury and comfort of the built-in dressing table, closet, and overhead cabinets available in the bedrooms. According to the ad, “The Lustron Home is the result of American industrial and engineering ‘know-how’ applied for the first time to home building.”

Although the Lustron Corporation enjoyed a modicum of success during its brief run, ultimately the very RFC loans that had bankrolled the company’s early efforts also came to be its downfall. During the summer of 1949 Strandlund’s \$37.5 million in outstanding debt caught the attention of *Time* magazine and of U.S. representative from Ohio Frederick Smith, a member of the House Banking and Currency Committee. Illness later that year forced

Smith to hand the probe over to Representative Albert Cole of Kansas, who by October was calling for an investigation into Lustron’s alleged mismanagement of its several government loans. Media criticism of Lustron continued for the last few months of the year, and on December 28, 1949, the RFC terminated its loans to the company, effectively putting the Lustron Corporation out of business in 1950.

Ironically, although the Lustron had been marketed as the “home of the future,” the housing trends that followed the post-war era starkly contrasted with these small, neat, efficient metal homes. By the 1950s building materials had become

CHRISTY DAVIS is the assistant director of the Society’s Cultural Resources Division. She has a longtime interest in Lustron Homes and is available for speaking engagements on the topic (785-272-8681, ext. 215).

more accessible and housing was more easily attainable. With the Great Depression behind them and post-war housing shortages met, American families turned their sights toward large sprawling ranch houses and have since grown accustomed to significantly more living space as new homes have reached an average size of seventeen hundred square feet. Because they are small in comparison with the average new home, Lustrons now are less likely to be occupied by the young families with children to whom Strandlund originally marketed them. Current buyers more commonly are single adults or couples without children. Cathy Buss shares one of the ninety-two remaining Kansas Lustrons with her daughter. "I cannot imagine having more than two people living in the house," she says.

Of the Kansas Lustrons, fifteen have been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and twenty-eight more are eligible for listing. Lustrons are dotted across our state in towns from Abilene to WaKeeney; the greatest known number stand in Great Bend. Although the halcyon days of the Lustron have come and gone, it is likely these sturdy, unique little buildings will remain a part of our neighborhoods for many years to come.